Danielle Surliuga

Online Ad Critique

CCT356

Prof. Mike Jones

**Analysis 1 – American apparel and The Sartorialist by Scott Schuman**

As a fashion addict, I follow the blog “The Sartorialist” by Scott Schuman and check it almost religiously for updates. Everyday after looking through the new pictures posted I glance at the American Apparel banner on the left column to see what new looks they have up.

American Apparel is a clothing and accessories brand that markets itself of simplicity. The brand is popular among the young demographics of fashion aficionados and, even though their products are extremely trivial for the price they charge, they managed to create a large costumer base. I believe the main reason why they are able to retain existing costumers and increase share is through well-positioned and discrete advertising campaigns such as the one in The Sartorialist.

Scot Schuman’s blog is updated almost daily with pictures of regular people on the streets that the photographer deems stylish. Since he started his page, he gained millions of fans and followers in the fashion world that appreciate his photographs and his choices of subject. He is an opinion influencer in the fashion world – as are most acclaimed bloggers – for his knowledge, understanding and appreciation of simplicity. Even his webpage is minimalist, basic and elegant.

Therefore, the American Apparel ads in the Sartorialist definitely reach the right target audience. The people that follow the blog most likely subscribe to the same fashion ideal of simple chic that is sold by American Apparel. Also, they are most likely knowledgeable of the fashion world and know the strength Scott Schulman exerts in it. Thus if he ‘endorses’ AA in his blog (actually, AA is the only ad in the Sarorialist), the brand has to be good and stylish – they have to buy it, they have to click on the vertical banner (note: even the way he positions the banner in the blog is elegant; it doesn’t interfere at all with the content). More than just reaching the target market actually, the brand knowingly reach more consumers then they would if they chose to advertise on traditional media such as fashion magazines, since thesartorialist.blogspot.com has more views in a day than vogue issues sold in a month (coping, 2009).

The campaign is most likely paid for in a cost per click manner, where the blogger receives a fixed rate for each click redirected to the AA website. The blog holds the banner with images of some looks of the current collection (that change in a matter of seconds, very discretely). If the reader clicks on the banner it redirects him or her to the page of the AA online store (on a separate tab) where they can se different views of the garments and hopefully purchase them.

I would say the campaign is very effective in terms of reaching the target market, maintaining American Apparel’s branding and not interfering with the blog’s integrity. Schuman claimed he was worried that including advertisements in his blog would jeopardize the trust relationship he established with his viewers (ash he mentioned on this interview). He was concerned that they would think he “sold out” and his ideas were no longer honest, but biased by marketing. However, because the campaign is very well planned and contextualized, even though it doesn’t interfere with the content it is still clearly advertorial and commercial, and no mentions are made to the brand in the posts. Even based on my personal experience I can say it is effective. I ended up several times in the e-commerce store and the only reason I didn’t purchase was due to my lack of financial resources (A.K.A: I’m a broke student). Thus, its a win-win situation: the blogger gets paid to publish an ad on his precious real-estate while the brand increases its sales based on the bloggers readership – that remains unaffected by the campaign and is free to keep growing!

**Analysis 2 – Content specific ads by Shopzilla and bakeorbreak.com**

Possibly the only thing I love as much as fashion is baking. In an attempt to fulfill my baker alter ego I visit numerous baking blogs, such as bakeorbreak.com (BoB for short).

BoB’s main page has many instances of online campaigns: banners, boxes, movie snippets and even Googleads, all placed strategically in the right sidebar and in between posts. All the campaigns are invariably food-related, which I believe helps maintain (somewhat) the integrity of the blogger even though she clearly has a compelling commercial interest. Actually, contextualizing not only helps maintain the integrity of the writer but also guarantees the ads will reach the correct target market – most likely young amateur bakers or food lovers. Obviously, a well-known blog filled with mouth-watering, indulgent pastry pictures, descriptions and recipes (what some like to call food porn – and they have a point) attracts and retains a readership that is interested in food and baking. Therefore, if done correctly, any campaign related to food and culinary products placed in BoB should be successful in reaching consumers.

As I mentioned, there are many ads throughout the site. However, for the purpose of this analysis, I will focus on the advertisements that are placed on the end of each of the recipe pages. This secondary page contains a basic, printable version of the recipe that was described in a particular post, a left hand side bar with some links and (of course) a banner ad, and all the way in the bottom a selection of 4 items for sale – which is actually an ad, and the campaign I will analyze.

The ad has an image of each item, a brief description and a price range for which it can be bought. The links (that I clicked on it as part of my research for each item) take the reader to a Bizrate page, which conducts sales similarly to Amazon or e-bay (drawing from different vendors). As all other ads that are featured in BoB, this is also highly contextualized, in an attempt to reach the target market and get the highest possible conversion rate. To guarantee these effective ads, the blogger subscribed to Shopzilla.com (evidenced by a small link placed right after the products’ offerings).

From my research I found that shopzilla is a Cost-per-click affiliate program that helps people sponsor their sites by connecting them to online stores, which sell products relevant to the content. As a subscriber, BoB receives a fix rate for every user that clicks on one of the products that Shopzilla places on their website (they should thank me for doing this critique’s research).

Also, Shopzilla’s marketing strategy of introducing a link to their website right under the products advertised is very clever. A lot of the people that read BoB have their own blogs or know people that have blogs. In that way, the affiliate marketing company might gain new clients (other bloggers that read BoB for example) through already existing clients.

All things considered, in terms of effectiveness I believe the ad probably does generate some profit to the blogger and some sales for the online store. The placement on the secondary page instead of the mains page is ideal because it maximizes interest. If the reader went past the images and brief text, all the way through reading the recipe of a post, they are definitely interested in baking and cooking-wear. That reader is the most likely to click on the products and buy something.

At the same time however, going through the ads on different recipes, I saw that even though they are contextualized, they are not content-specific, meaning the products offered aren’t necessarily relevant to the recipe being read. I think this ad would be more effective if the products were actually what you needed to use for the recipe you were reading. A highly specific ad would be almost a guaranteed sale – as a baker myself I am always missing something and sometimes don’t know where to buy it or am just too lazy to look for it.

I have to say I never realized how much advertising was in this website before I was asked to do this critique. I never really paid attention to anything they were trying to sell me. This has two possible reasons: either the advertisements are badly placed or I, as a communications student, am now trained to be oblivious to advertisements. It also might just be that, because there are so many different banners and boxes and little videos flashing at the reader that anyone (not just communication students) becomes impermeable to them. The content of the site, that is very interesting and relevant, but to appreciate it you have to phase out the ads. Maybe if there were fewer, more elegant and well-placed ads, the blogger would be able to get just as much income from ad campaigns without overloading the readers to the point that they ignore most of the ads served.

Bibliography:

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